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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 001549

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SA/INS, PRM/ANE

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TAGS: PREF PGOV PREL BT IN NP

SUBJECT: NEPAL: BHUTANESE REFUGEE FRUSTRATION GROWING -
THIRD COUNTRY RESETTLEMENT DESIRED

REF: A. KATHMANDU 230

1B. KATHMANDU 1147

1C. NEW DELHI 4698

1D. KATHMANDU 1444

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty; Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Only surprising in that it took so long to come about, some Bhutanese refugee leaders and many refugees are starting to ask for immediate third-country resettlement. During a discussion between StaffDel Blazey and two refugee leaders, as well as with young professional refugees, refugee frustration with the seemingly interminable negotiations over their possible return and hopelessness about a forthcoming solution were palpable. The refugees wanted to be able to return as citizens to their property with a third party, such as UNHCR, to ensure their safety in Bhutan. Unless the bilateral process is restarted expeditiously, and repatriation begins soon, third-country resettlement may become the only option. END SUMMARY.

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TWO REFUGEE LEADERS BRIEF STAFFDEL BLAZEY
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12. (C) During a meeting with StaffDel Blazey upon the StaffDel's return from Bhutan, Ratan Gazmere (Chief Coordinator, Association of Human Rights Activists Bhutan) and Tek Nath Rizal (senior refugee leader and former Royal Advisory Council member to the King of Bhutan) told the StaffDel that after so many years in refugees camps, it was time to start looking at other options, such as third-country resettlement. This was despite the real desire of the refugees to return home. The StaffDel told the refugees that their conversations with Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) officials in Thimpu, including the Foreign Minister, had led them to believe that Bhutan did intend to bring home some of the refugees. However, the 22 December incident in which some refugees reacted violently to the Bhutanese Joint Verification Team leaders' pronouncement of the conditions of return had offended the Bhutanese sense of national pride. The situation needed to be addressed to the satisfaction of the Bhutanese before more progress could be made. (NOTE: A local press article on August 5 quoted Prime Minister Deuba as indicating that outstanding issues between Nepal and Bhutan had been resolved on the margins of the BIMSTEC Summit in Thailand, and that the "process" would restart. END NOTE.)

13. (C) Dismissing the RGOB's perspective as propaganda, Gazmere asked why the RGOB would sound so flexible to the StaffDel, while almost at the same time the Bhutanese National Assembly was dismissing the notion of allowing refugees to return. Rizal argued that under the Bhutanese system of government, these two disparate statements were coming from the same mouth. The Bhutanese head of the Joint Verification Team had been a District Head in southern Bhutan during the start of the forced exodus, Gazmere noted, and the Bhutanese Ambassador to India had been the Home Minister at the same time. The refugees were hard-pressed to believe any purported good intentions from these RGOB players.

14. (C) Turning to the presently halted bilateral verification process, Gazmere doubted whether repatriation would ever happen. Moreover, the refugees had no input in the verification process or determining into which category refugees would fall. Gazmere pointed out the logical discrepancy of having family units divided into different categories. In some cases, for example, parents were Category Two (allowed to return under stringent conditions) and children were Category Four (criminals subject to arrest upon return). In the unlikely event that verification restarted, Gazmere stated, the refugees should be included in the categorization process in the other camps to prevent such anomalies. Moreover, what right did the GON have to agree to categorize refugees as Bhutanese criminals, he asked? However, the refugees would not challenge the verification process carried out thus far if the conditions for return were acceptable to the refugees.

15. (C) After more than 13 years in the refugee camps, people were losing hope of returning, Gazmere noted. Meanwhile, if the RGOB had already agreed through the bilateral

verification process that 293 of their own citizens (74 families) were in the camps but had still not repatriated them, what hope did the other refugees have that they would be fairly treated by Bhutan, Gazmere asked? Recently, several families had approached UNHCR to request immediate third-country resettlement, and Gazmere believed more would do so soon. Without refugee involvement in the verification process and acceptable conditions for repatriation, Gazmere believed it was more and more unlikely that many refugees would return voluntarily.

16. (C) The power of senior refugee leaders to advise the refugees and to continue to push for non-violence was waning, Gazmere cautioned. Gazmere and Rizal both stated that, while they would not push refugees to either return or not to Bhutan in any event, their ability to affect the refugees' decision in this regard was becoming questionable. Referring to recent stories of Maoist penetration of the refugee camps as possible but not certain, Gazmere indicated that it was clear that increasing frustration, especially among the many young people in the camps, was leading some refugees to become more radicalized. It was time to start looking at other options, such as third-country resettlement.

BHUTANESE REFUGEE YOUTH FORUM

17. (C) Three leaders from the Bhutanese Refugee Youth Forum met with PolOff on August 4 and asked that the USG immediately begin to accept Bhutanese refugees for resettlement. (NOTE: They also delivered a letter to the Ambassador containing the same request. The letter has been faxed to PRM. END NOTE.) Bahadur Singh Subba, Kisor Pradhan and Prakash Subedi (all in their 30's; a college advisor, a college lecturer and a medical doctor, respectively) explained the difficulties facing young refugees. (NOTE: The three said their organization represented 6,000 young Bhutanese refugees, not including their spouses and children. END NOTE.) Many refugees were working illegally outside the camps, they admitted, but faced wage discrimination based on their illegal status. Meanwhile, refugees were regularly granted permission to live outside the camps for academic pursuits. However, this created problems, because in many cases the refugees and their immediate families did not want to return to the camps after completing their degrees. In the case of Subedi, for example, although he had completed his medical degree, he was pursuing a second degree to maintain the right to continue to live outside the camp. "My children don't want to live in the camps." In fact, he stated that he had applied with UNHCR for permission to serve as a medical doctor in Iraq, but the request was denied by the GON. "We want to start our careers, and we have children and elderly parents to care for." Many young refugees were facing depression, Subedi argued. "I think I have prescribed more anti-depressants than any other doctor in Nepal," he stated. "I don't want to do that anymore."

18. (C) Arguing, as Rizal had, that the RGOB was being duplicitous, Pradhan alleged that 50 of the 150-member National Assembly in Bhutan were appointed by the King, and the other 100 were appointed by District Heads, certainly with the King's approval. Many young refugees such as themselves had marched for democracy before the forced exodus, and even if they returned, there was little hope of the freedom they desired, Pradhan stated. In any case, "Our camps have not been verified by the JVT yet," Pradhan noted, "but we all know that we will be put in Category 4 (criminals) for participating in peaceful demonstrations." Subba added that he had already been jailed in Bhutan for participating in a rally for human rights, and had been made to sign two blank papers upon his release, which he thought had come about because of the intervention of Amnesty International UK. "I will agree to go back to jail," he said, "but only if UNHCR is there to protect me." The three worried that many young refugees such as themselves were running out of time to start their careers and be productive. They also dismissed any hope of the bilateral process achieving any results. "Besides," they asked, "even if we return, what is the hope of real human rights and democracy?" Dismissing both Nepal's efforts in the bilateral process as well as the notion of integration in Nepal out-of-hand, the only durable solution they saw for the refugees was to immediately begin third-country resettlement. "Can we apply today for refugee status to the U.S.?" they asked.

19. (C) COMMENT: The mood change among the refugees is palpable. While many of the older refugees would probably still prefer to return to Bhutan, the senior leaders feel like they are losing their influence over the larger refugee population, and as such, violence or radicalization might be the result. This is also the first time that younger refugees have stepped out from behind the traditional leaders to demand a different course of action -- resettlement. Indeed, unless real progress on the repatriation front comes very quickly, third-country resettlement could become the

preferred option for many refugees. END COMMENT.
MORIARTY